

Employment, Session A: A Job, Just Like Anyone Else!

Meeting Notes

Facilitator: Ken Renaud

Four Rhode Islanders with disabilities and their support networks shared their inspiring stories of realizing their community based employment dreams.

Alexis Daluz along with two other friends, Emily and Shamus has started a greeting card business called “*Can Do Cards*”. Peggy Daluz, Alexis mother explained that she was looking for something that her daughter would enjoy doing that would also earn money. Alexis works on the computer, keeping track of incoming e-mails, future orders, operates the scanner and printer. Emily sorts the cards and packages them in clear plastic wrap and bow that also makes for a nice gift. Shamus takes the pictures that feature scenes from each city or town in Rhode Island that captures recognizable landmarks such as the “Narragansett Towers” on Ocean Road, and the windmill in Jamestown. The cards are sold at the Blue Hydrangea and the Gatherings coffee shop. Cards are blank inside but can be personalized upon request. At this time a website is being created by a student from Bryant College. If you would like more information, you can email candocards@msn.com.

Alexis receives supports from the Perspectives Corporation who work with family members and friends to help support their clients. The card business began one year ago and they have earned enough money to purchase a new printer and ink for the card printing. It was easy to see by the expression on Alexis’ what a difference this business has made in her life.

Patrick Sorowice shared that finding meaningful employment has been an “uphill battle”. “No one wanted to hire me – but wouldn’t tell me to my face”.

Ken Renaud from PAL visited Patrick at his home and began the process of telling Patrick’s story by asking him and his family what he has done in his life that he was most proud of. One theme, always present in Patrick’s stories was his sense of humor.

His wit in many situations did not go unnoticed. Colleen Chopy from Avatar who knows Patrick very well, saw an ad for Frank O’Donnell’s Comedy School Boot Camp and immediately thought of Patrick. After making several inquiries, Patrick had an opportunity to meet with Frank and soon he was on his way to Comedy School Boot Camp. Patrick jokes that it was the longest two months of his life. All kidding aside, Patrick made some really good connections and he received a lot of support from fellow comedians. After the two months of Boot Camp he performed at Twin Rivers Catch A New Rising Star Contest. When asked what this experience has done for him, Patrick answered “Comedy has really saved my life”. He also said that he has more confidence and “...making people laugh makes me feel good.”

James Foster worked at Cherry Stones restaurant in the maintenance department. He was voted “Employee of the Month”; unfortunately that was only a seasonal job. Jim wanted to

keep working and when he saw a help wanted sign at the Stop & Shop he was determined to work again. With the support from Annie Johnson, job developer with Trudeau was able to get Jim in the Partners Program and Jim began working for Stop & Shop bringing the carriages from the parking lot inside the store. After just two days, he began bagging groceries inside the store 15 hours per week. Annie describes Jim as being a “self advocate” and said that Jim was relentless, encouraging everyone to keep moving until he was employed. When asked how he feels, Jim responded that he feels good inside and getting a paycheck makes him feel good also.

Koji Dennis began working at Babies R Us nine years ago. His job today is a great triumph and one that was achieved through hard work and determination. In 1996 Koji used to be on many different medications, his job consisted of yard work and he was supported two to one staff. Ten years later, he is med free, he will be getting his own apartment, his social life has greatly improved and he has graduated from Integrated Clinical Services.

When he was first hired at Babies R Us they had concerns about Koji’s appropriateness with the customers and his job duties were limited. Today, Koji interacts with customers and does a little bit of everything.

Koji is a role model for other people at his home. If he notices someone having a stressful situation Koji offers his support and will suggest using “deep breathing”, a practice that has helped him many times.

Common Themes Among All Four People

- ✓ Success
- ✓ Feeling good about themselves
- ✓ Driven by the Individual – they didn’t give up their dream or didn’t take no for an answer
- ✓ Each person was supported
- ✓ Finding positive relationships
- ✓ Empowerment

What gets in the way?

- Supports needed are not funded
- Glitches with transportation
- Accessing natural supports
- Lack of partnerships between clear state policy and stakeholders
- What do you do about people who don’t want to work? Flexibility and availability of options

Benefit of hearing peoples stories

Example – Koji is a role model for his housemates and Society as well

Ways to assist people in telling their story -

- “A simple tool can create remarkable results” – Ken Renaud
- One of the tools used by Ken Renaud from Pal when supporting someone in telling their story is from “Your Learning Journey” A Booklet Companion to Make a Difference by John

O'Brien and Beth Mount, Inclusion Press. When a person is sharing his/or her stories think about:

Gifts of the hand – (and feet and voice) – abilities and skills that a person can contribute by recognizing people and remembering names, dancing, fixing things, singing, typing, drawing, etc.

Gifts of the head – knowledge questions, experience, and information that a person can contribute by organizing and classifying things, travel routes, sports news, solving puzzles, etc.

Gifts of the heart – interests, enthusiasms, personal passions, and the rewards of a relationship a person can bring to others, spiritual gifts, etc.

Gifts of history and identity – experiences, knowledge, and types of belonging that come from a person's membership in a particular family, religion, national or ethnic group, and citizenship.

Other Comments

- Learning Experience – Some people took jobs that were not a good match, but it was an opportunity to try out a job. All young people (with or without a disability) need to try different jobs to discover what it is they like to do.
- The reality is that we have a date to respond by - what works and what doesn't work.
- What gets in the way?
- Continued supports that don't get funded
- Do certain things because it's the right thing to do, Not because it saves money, but because this is what the people want.
- Would like to have more opportunity for conversations about the issues, the challenges and how do we form partnerships. (Meat and Potatoes)
- Frame it in a way that states –
Values, Beliefs, What is important, what do we know and think that is good for people receiving services.
- Start out with what is important. Each person has an opportunity to say this is what is important to me. – Give back to community.
- Everyone is at a different place
- There needs to be flexibility and variety
- What are the values of the State of RI?
- How have things evolved
- Integration into the community
- Collectively – Need to move in a positive direction – process of all the pieces
- Globally – Process cannot be rushed
- Need more time for discussions on employment – conversations about successes, issues, set policy and direction, yet preserving flexibility, self-determination and options. A lot can be learned from history. We can't rush the process. We need to work with all stakeholders.
- Refer to John Butterworth's presentation – changes took place over time.

One of three tables' discussion on the first question

What do we value in the current system?

- Everyone has the right to be employed
- Allows for flexibility
- Individual choice and planning – different opportunities
- People have control over their own funding and can distribute their funding in various ways
- Ability to have various opportunities and learning experiences
- Big range of options
- System is flexible – the Division is open to what people want to do
- Committed workforce that is caring and well-trained who are willing to be creative in supporting the person
- Medically fragile people can remain safe and healthy in the community
- People's need change over time and the current system has the flexibility to meet the changing needs
- System values the contributions people with disabilities make to society
- Value the support that society has given to the DD system with funding
- Partnership with stakeholders to build and enhance the system – we have grown together
- Keeps people in their communities and maintains their community connections
- People have a place to go during the day to do something that is meaningful to them
- Knowledge and experience of the people in the DD service system – learn from them and then teach others
- RI is aware and participating in national trends in the field